Most Fast-Food Chains Still Serve Beef Raised With Antibiotics

Consumer groups give Chipotle and Panera Bread top grades, but 15 other chains got failing grades

By Jessica Branch
October 31, 2019

When you buy a fast-food burger or roast beef sandwich, chances are it's still made with meat from cattle given antibiotics they don't need, according to the fifth annual Chain Reaction Report (PDF) issued by six consumer groups, including Consumer Reports. The practice of giving antibiotics to food animals to prevent, rather than treat, illnesses is a main contributor to antibiotic resistance.

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The report grades the top 25 chain restaurants according to their antibiotics policies for the beef they serve. Fifteen

restaurants, including Burger King, Applebee's, and Starbucks, received a grade of F for having no policy or plan to reduce the use of antibiotics in their beef supply.

Just two restaurants, Chipotle and Panera Bread, got an A for sourcing beef raised without the routine use of the drugs.

> **Download a PDF of Chain Reaction V: How Top Restaurants Rate on Reducing Antibiotic Use in Their Beef Supplies.**

The Trouble With Antibiotic Use

Healthy animals raised for food in crowded, stressful conditions are often given antibiotics to prevent disease. Nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics (those that are used to fight disease in people) sold in the U.S. are given to food animals, with cattle receiving the largest share, according to the new report.

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As a result, these drugs are becoming less effective at destroying the bacteria that cause potentially deadly illnesses, such as the superbug MRSA. According to an expert estimate published last year in Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology, 160,000 deaths a year in the U.S. are caused by

antibiotic-resistant infections. That makes these infections the fourth-leading cause of death in the U.S., after heart disease, cancer, and accidents.

"We created the scorecard to track the practices of the largest chain restaurants in the U.S. on sourcing meat raised without antibiotics," says Meg Bohne, associate director, campaigns, at Consumer Reports. "In the five years we've been issuing the report, we've seen more and more chains agree to serve only chicken raised without medically-important antibiotics. But progress on beef has been disappointingly slow."

Here's the Beef

The Chain Reaction report (PDF) is produced annually by Consumer Reports, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center at Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University, the Food Animal Concerns Trust, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, and the Center for Food Safety.

Earlier reports concentrated on both beef and chicken, and over this five-year period, the majority of chains have moved away from serving chicken raised with antibiotics. Now, the Chain Reaction group is focusing on beef, given the problem of drug overuse in cattle.

To arrive at the grades awarded this year, the Chain Reaction group surveyed each company and evaluated its public statements on antibiotic use to determine whether it had a policy in place to limit antibiotics and if so, what–if anything–that policy restricted. It also looked at whether the company implemented that policy and if it made information on both available to the public.

Of the 21 chains that serve beef, two were clear standouts, Bohne says. Chipotle got an A and Panera an A-. Both companies serve beef and chicken raised without antibiotics and have third parties conduct at least some audits of their practices. "These companies have gotten top marks overall in every edition of the Chain Reaction report for abiding by responsible antibiotics policies," she says.

The 2019 Chain Reaction report also praises Shake Shack and BurgerFi—two U.S. burger chains that are not in the top 25 fast-food chains but are serving only "no antibiotic" beef in all of their restaurants.

McDonalds, the largest beef purchaser in the world, saw its grade rise from an F last year to a C, thanks to its December 2018 announcement of a comprehensive antibiotics use policy that commits to reducing the use of medically important antibiotics in its global beef supply chain. The company has said it will issue reduction goals by the end of 2020 and is committed to making its progress public via regular reports starting in 2022. This represents the first comprehensive antibiotics reduction policy created by a major U.S. burger chain, the report notes. Subway also received a C for pledging to implement a strong antibiotics policy for its beef by 2025.

Wendy's, the third-largest U.S. burger chain, earned a D+. The company has taken small steps, cutting the use of just one of the more than two dozen antibiotics important for humans and approved for use in cattle by just 20 percent in only some of its beef supply.

Taco Bell received a D, saved from an F only by its promise in July 2019 to reduce the use of medically important antibiotics in its beef supply by 25 percent by 2025.

The chains that got an F because they have no established policy restricting the use of antibiotics in their beef are: Applebee's, Arby's, Buffalo Wild Wings, Burger King, Chili's, Dairy Queen, Domino's, IHOP, Jack in the Box, Little Caesars, Olive Garden, Panda Express, Pizza Hut, Sonic, and Starbucks.

Catching Up to Chicken

When it comes to poultry, 13 of the 25 biggest chains (Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Chipotle, Domino's, Dunkin' Donuts, Jack in the Box, KFC, McDonald's, Panera, Starbucks, Subway, Taco Bell, and Wendy's) have put responsible antibiotic use policies and practices into place, while four more (Applebee's, IHOP, Olive Garden, and Pizza Hut) are on their way. Eight still have no policy: Arby's, Buffalo Wild Wings, Chili's, Dairy Queen, Little Caesars, Panda Express, Popeye's, and Sonic.

Ninety-two percent of chicken sold in the U.S. last year was raised without the use of medically important antibiotics, and this change has largely happened in the last five years. Advocates are hopeful about a similar movement taking place in the beef industry.

"The first year we did this scorecard," says Bohne, "only five companies had policies limiting the use of antibiotics in their chicken supplies. Five years later, 17 of them do. That kind of headway shows that restaurants are responding to public demand and gives us confidence that we will see meaningful improvement around beef as well."

"Ideally, we would have federal policy in place that says medically important antibiotics can only be used in meat and poultry production when animals are sick. In the absence of federal action, leadership in the marketplace is critical to

solving this problem," says Lena Brook, Food Campaigns Director with the NRDC. "Large restaurants like McDonald's, Taco Bell, Wendy's, and Burger King buy enormous amounts of beef and can demand better practices on the part of their suppliers. They have the power and the responsibility to move the needle on antibiotics use in the beef industry, just as they did with chicken."

CR's Bohne acknowledges that for companies to adopt these more responsible policies takes money as well as time. "If there weren't a financial impact, they'd already be doing it," she says. "Most chains don't want to charge customers more so they absorb those costs. But more and more are coming on board because consumers care where their meat comes from."

And what do advocates want to see happen for next year?

"We want more companies to adopt policies limiting antibiotic use in beef," says Bohne. "Right now our coalition is calling on Wendy's, given its market share—as we did with McDonald's last year—to be the next chain to make a meaningful commitment. So far they've taken a small step to curb antibiotic use in the beef they source, and that's not going to cut it. We want to see the company make a time-bound commitment to end the overuse."

Consumer Reports reached out to Wendy's for comment on the campaign targeting its policies and didn't hear back.

If you want to tell Wendy's to make this important commitment to public health, you can send the company a message by clicking here.

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